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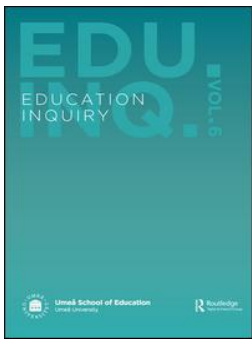
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ORIGINAL ARTICLE



# Trapped in the genres – a student's writer development in the subject of Danish on possibilities and restrictions of narratives in Danish Upper Secondary Education

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## ABSTRACT



Since the reform of Upper Secondary School in 2005 in Denmark, genre writing has been mandatory in the L1 subject. In the predefined genres, argumentative reasoning, textual analysis and disciplinary knowledge are given high priority, whereas creative or narrative reasoning and writing are not part of the curriculum. In this article, the writer development of a student participant will be investigated, focusing on how narrative nonetheless becomes present in his assignments and how he negotiates the predefined genres he is supposed to write in the L1 subject. The main focus of this study is to explore how on the one hand narrative is a resource for writer development and disciplinary knowledge and on the other hand becomes part of the student's writer identity and identification with an exploratory student position. The empirical data consists of interviews and assignments, collected through the student's 3 years of upper secondary education. In conclusion, it is argued that narratives should be part of the L1 curriculum, as narratives have the potential to provide more holistic writer development and to contribute to disciplinary knowledge.

## KEYWORDS

Genre writing in L1; writer development; identity; narrative writing; small stories

## Introduction

Since 2005, genre writing has been mandatory in the L1 subject “Danish” in Danish Upper Secondary Education. In the L1 curriculum, the genres given are characterised by relatively formulaic features. Genres favoured in the L1 curriculum are “literary analyses”, “analysis and interpretation”, “essay”, and “article”. Argumentative reasoning and textual analysis are required foundations for writing in the subject and must be combined with disciplinary knowledge. Journalistic and essayistic writing are part of the curriculum too, but always with a close connection to disciplinary, argumentative reasoning. Narrative writing or reasoning are not part of the written genres. The students navigate in the genres in various ways. For some, the formal genre features are means for scaffolding, for others they represent substantial restrictions. In both cases, they have immense significance for the students' writer development and success in school. In a Norwegian study, Andersen and Hertzberg examined so-called “challengers” amongst exam writers and found that narrative was used as a “risk strategy”, where writers challenge genre expectations (Andersen & Hertzberg, 2005).

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This observation was confirmed by Piekut (2012, 2015). In the study of Danish upper secondary exam writers, it was found that personal narratives were the most frequent genre transgressions.

Bruner has argued that the prominent developmental theory in a given period (in recent decades this has been the “cognitive revolution”) is dominant because it echoes values already held in education. According to Bruner, this means that other developmental approaches are marginalised – e.g. approaches where narrative, poetic or imaginative skills are vital (Bruner, 1986a, 2004). In the subject of Danish, the genres give priority to logical reasoning and literary analysis. Narratives are only part of the subject in relation to receptive competencies in reading. Nonetheless, narratives often appear in students’ assignments, both as means for organising and shaping experience and knowledge and as strategies for constructing identities and connecting different domains of knowledge.

In the following, I will examine genre writing as it is practiced in Danish Upper Secondary School by paying attention to the writer development of one student, “Michael”. His paths through three years of upper secondary school reflect resistance, development and adaptation in relation to the genres given in the subject of Danish.

Through a representative selection of Michael’s written assignments during his education, I will shed light on significant and vital diachronic perspectives on his writing. Points of interest are narratives, and if and how narratives provide the potential to qualify writing and thereby contribute to academic development.

The two main questions that initiate this article are the following:

- What characterises Michael’s writing regarding the genres given in the subject?
- Which narrative strategies does Michael employ, and why do narratives seem to be important to his writing?

In the following it will be explored how Michael negotiates the genres given in the L1 subject, and whether narratives can qualify Michael’s academic development. Another perspective that will be explored is how changes or traces of development can be related to writing and writer identity. In this sense, the article focuses on more than the ongoing discussion about genres and school writing in the L1 subject, where narrative writing seems to be a vehicle or a scaffolding tool for academic and disciplinary writing (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Hillocks, 2008). Namely, the focus is on narratives as fundamentally important social and cognitive meaning-making tools, and how narratives are a resource for writer development and disciplinary knowledge.

Given that my focus is on one student in upper secondary school, there will be no claims about genre writing or writer development in general. Nevertheless, in other studies (Piekut, 2012; Krogh & Piekut, 2015) it is documented that narrative writing as genre transgression is present in almost all students’ writing in upper secondary school, even though the transgressions differ in volume, linguistic resources and importance.

In following Michael in interviews and in his assignments in L1, the article brings attention to the progressive changes in Michael’s view on school and writing, and the genres given prominence in the subject.

## Review of related literature

In research, there are several longitudinal studies of writing development following one or a few students through upper secondary or higher education (Roozen, 2010; Sommers, 2008; Spack, 1997). In Sternglass' (1993, 1997) longitudinal study, she examines an urban college student, Linda, through her college years. In the study, the relation between personal and academic stories is researched. The potential to develop as a successful student writer seems to be influenced by the student's life out of college. How the student Tim, an undergraduate history major, develops in the history discourse community is examined in Beaufort (2014). In the study, the development of writing expertise is in focus: which developmental changes occurred and which factors seem to contribute to changes in Tim's development. Compton-Lilly (2014) follows Peter, an African American writer, for a 10-year period from first grade through high school. In the study, the long-term trajectory of *becoming* a writer is highlighted. As part of this, affiliations and belongings rather than grammar, for instance, seem crucial for being a student. Compton-Lilly emphasises that classroom writing activities must invite students to engage in social networks that involve literacy and that educators must learn about students' lives outside of school to foster broader practices of writing.

As the developing identity of the writer Michael is in focus, I will give a short outline of "identity" as a notion in this study. It is well known that identity and identifications have rich and multiple theoretical conceptions. In the following, the approach will be limited to a social constructivist understanding of the notion. Identity is here understood in plural form as identities, as it captures the fluctuating, ambiguous characteristics of the concept, pointing to the understanding that identity does not exist as a fixed or permanent form. As Burgess & Ivanič point out, "identities in educational contexts are transitory, mediating identities" (2010, p. 230). Nevertheless, even if the apparently constantly shifting identities seem to be a present condition, Lemke accentuates that we still create a sense of a coherent and recognisable identity (Lemke, 2002). We construct and project identity in particular social and communicative contexts, according to various linguistic and socio-cultural resources at hand (Archakis & Tsakona, 2012; Ivanič, 1998). Viewing identity in terms of "identification" or "identifying" is beneficial, as this approach focuses on agency and the processes whereby people align themselves with e.g. groups, values and practices (Holland et al., 1998; Ivanič, 1998). In this perspective, it is interesting to see how students' processes of identification develop through and around genres as academic forms, by which they are identified and identify themselves with greater or lesser agency in the context of school.

## The methodological framework

The student in focus in this article, Michael, is participating in the project titled *Writing to Learn, Learning to Write. Literacy and Disciplinarity in Upper Secondary Education*, where all data are collected in compliance with human subject guidelines (Krogh, Christensen, & Jakobsen, 2015; Krogh & Piekut, 2015). The project includes a range of sub-studies, comprising this study of genre writing and narratives. The project aims to create new knowledge about students' identifications with school subjects and students' writing in the subjects (Christensen, Elf, & Krogh, 2014; Krogh & Jakobsen,

2016; Krogh et al., 2015). The researchers in the project have amongst other things conducted explorative; longitudinal studies of six students' trajectories of writing across the subjects from grade 9 to grade 12 (ages 15–19). Michael is one of these students. The primary data is the students' assignments and "talk around text" interviews (Lillis, 2008), mainly during their 3 years in upper secondary education. Secondary data comprises classroom observations, school and teaching documents.

The methodology is informed by ethnographic, writer-emic-oriented research, where the participant's perspective is central (Lillis, 2008, p. 360). The interview method "talk around text" extends the researchers perspective beyond the text and provides insight into the contextual and social practices of writing. The interviews provide the analysis with insider perspectives and information about the subject, the writer and the writing and gives access to discourses about being a student in upper secondary school.

During his 3 years of upper secondary school, Michael hands in 19 assignments in the L1 subject, mainly in the three dominant examination genres: literary article, feature and essay. In the project, we conducted 18 interviews with Michael during his education. Some of the interviews are about being a student in upper secondary school and about writing in the L1 subject; in others, the different subjects or assignments are in focus.

The backdrop for the present analysis of Michael's writer development are five assignments (out of 19), distributed evenly throughout his 3 years of secondary education. The selection of these five assignments is substantiated by the variation of genres (essay, literary article and a reflection-paper – the genres will be presented below), the diachronic perspectives and the variety of narratives in the assignment. The five assignments are selected with relation to relevance and offer insight into Michael's narrative resources and his struggle with the genres, but they do not differ or diverge from his other assignments in the subject. As such, the selection is representative regarding the narrative and creative resources in his assignments, and it is consistent with Michael's writing in the subject in general.

By systematically analysing Michael's assignments and tracking his narratives and rhetorical resources, writing patterns and categories can be discovered. By identifying analytical categories like narratives and "small stories" and recurrent language resources as part of Michael's identifications, the patterns of re-ordering time, knowledge and experience inside and outside of school become visible. Michael's narrative and language resources grow into context for each other over the timespan of three years (Bakhtin, 1986; Eubanks, 2009).

It is important to highlight a few conditions when analysing development. Even with an ethnographic approach, where interviews with Michael and close analysis of his assignments are providing "thick description" (Geertz, 1973), there must be a sensitivity towards jumping to categorical conclusions about changes or development (Prior, 2004). Still, the data show important outlines of changes, dislocations and genre adaptations regarding Michael's development as a student and writer.

## The theoretical framework

### *Narrative as mode*

In narrative theory, it is claimed that a narrative structuring of our lives and experiences with the world is fundamental for human understanding and interaction with others

(Bruner J.S., 1986a; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Labov & Waletzky, 1967; Ochs & Capps, 2001). As narrative theory, or narratology, is a veritable minefield of definitions, a brief framework for the application of narrative is needed. In this article, narrative as *text* or parts of texts, and narrative as *mode*, that is as a way of thinking and structuring experience (Bruner, 1986a; De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012), will be distinguished. Both understandings will be part of the analysis. Bruner (1986a) differentiates between two basic ways of thinking, the paradigmatic and the narrative mode. When studying narratives as mode, you look for ways of thinking and constructing the individual reality. It is a cognitive structuring of experience, more than a specific feature of a text: “The central concern is not on how narrative as text is constructed, but rather how it operates as an instrument of mind in the construction of reality” (Bruner, 1991, p. 5). Narrative as mode organises the world by giving it meaning, context and structure. It links disconnected experiences and gives shape and coherence to life. In relation to students’ texts, narrative as mode is settled in the way the students structure and organise their writing, or in the way students establish and develop the topic in the genre. Students’ compositions can be shaped by all-encompassing or embedded smaller narratives (Eubanks, 2009). Narrative as mode is often seen as a natural narrative competence that probably is learned simultaneously with our first language (Herman, 2007) and draws on human and symbolic recognitions rather than scientific and empirical findings. The two ways of thinking, the paradigmatic and the narrative, are not understood as hierarchical, but as two cognitively different ways to experience, organise and construct reality (Bruner, 1986a, 1991). The paradigmatic mode appeals to formal and logical thinking involving categorisations, sound arguments and conceptualisations. The paradigmatic language is typically linearly structured, consistent and coherent and is thereby the preferred mode in the L1 genres. The narrative mode strives to tell dramatised and moving stories where intentions and human characteristics are fundamental (Bruner, 1991).

That students avail themselves of narratives as mode thus seems obvious, even though writing in secondary education strongly accentuates the paradigmatic mode.

### **Narratives as text – “small stories”**

Narrative as a textual category or structure can be characterised as a representation of temporally and causally connected events entailing change or conflict, or at least a complication. Narratives are thus representations of real or imaginary events, carried by anthropomorphic characters (Abbott, 2008; Herman, 2007).

To operationalise narrative as text in the analysis, I see narrative as the actual, linguistically expressed manifestation of a story (Virtanen, 1992). Virtanen points out that the narrative text-type can be used in any discourse type or genre – but that the opposite does not apply. As that, a narrative can potentially be realised in different types of discourses, as we see in Michael’s texts.

Another perspective on narratives is Bamberg and Georgakopoulou’s concept of *small stories* (Bamberg, 2006; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Georgakopoulou, 2007). “Small Stories” is an umbrella term for more fleeting, brief and insignificant stories of everyday experience and recent events. They can be fragments of stories of past, present or future events, and the focus is on interactions and the



narrator's positioning in and with the story. The concept should also be understood metaphorically as designating less solid aspects of life lived at the micro level (minutes and hours). Narratives and more specifically "small stories" have a dual perspective. On the one hand, they can (re)present and (re)create meaning by (re)telling something that has a narrative structure beforehand. On the other hand, narratives are devices for making new meaning and for giving structure to experience.

Small stories are in that sense fleeting moments of narrative orientation to the world, and to social interactions (Georgakopoulou, 2007, p. 152). As such, small stories function as a backup, elaboration on or extension of e.g. an argument or understanding in the assignments. However, small story research stresses that a narrative not only should be defined in regards to prototypical textual criteria, but also as an interactional activity and engagement (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012).

Identity constructions in "small stories" in students' texts may reflect moments of change in the "here-and-now" in relation to their ontogenetic life-story and thereby be of interest from a developmental perspective (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Simpson, 2011).

## A genre perspective

The analysis of Michael's writer development extends previous studies of writing and genre competencies in the subject of Danish (Krogh & Piekut, 2015; Piekut, 2012). Genres have become a key notion in the curriculum of secondary education after 2005, and for some students the genres are a challenge due to the formally defined textual frameworks and the rather narrow limits for linguistic and expressive voicing. The genres are embedded in the school and the subject's discourse community, and students must learn to navigate the genres in the subject.

Genre awareness and knowledge are prioritised in the L1 subject at both educational levels. In lower secondary school (grades 0–9) narratives are taught alongside journalistic and essayistic assignment genres, where personal experience is invited to be part of the writing. In lower secondary school, the students are exposed to argumentative, essayistic and narrative writing where both personal experience and argumentative reasoning are known as relevant cognitive and communicative resources. In upper secondary school, however, this relevance changes as narrative reasoning is not part of the L1 genres. Argumentative reasoning and literary analysis are taught in both lower and upper secondary school.

The genres in which students are trained to write in upper secondary school are mainly "essay", "feature" and "literary analysis". The essay is the least formulaic genre but still tied to argumentative reasoning, textual analysis and disciplinary knowledge. In the essay, argumentative resources, addressing disciplinary text material and vocabulary are in focus.

In the feature, a school-version of the journalistic genre, the student must give a short account or review of a topic, and a characterisation followed by a discussion in relation to the texts' given. Issues from the text material are to be given priority in an argumentative writing mode.



In the “literary analysis” there has to be an introduction to the topic, an extended text analysis and a discussion, finishing the assignment by summing up the topic. Analytical presentation and an elaborated disciplinary knowledge are required.

In all genres, relevant disciplinary knowledge and terms are required. The dominant academic values in the genres are competencies in logical reasoning and literary analysis, positioning the adolescent mainly as a rational academic writer. Texts from the booklet of the assignments must always be addressed explicitly and analytically, and students are also expected to draw on overall knowledge of the subject. In Bakhtinian terms (1986), the genres invite a dialogical approach, as the written genres mime or pretend a genuine communication between writer and reader, but at the same time restrict genuine communication by the disciplinary genre demands. These ambivalent “double expectations” (Togeby, 2015) make writing in the genres a complex business: the student must navigate the formalistic expectations and at the same time engage in a pretended dialogic genre. A dynamic genre approach is limited due to the rather fixed genre requirements, even though an individualised realisation of the genres is expected. Narratives and personal experience are not seen as relevant resources for writing or actualising the genre requirements.

### Michael – a presentation

The following will provide a brief overview of Michael’s relationship with and thoughts about school and youth, and his reflections on writing in the genres in the subject of Danish. The aim of the introduction and the following analysis is also to gain an understanding of how writing in school and the students’ experience outside school interrelate.

Michael is a student in the upper secondary programme with biotechnology as his main field of study. From the beginning of his secondary education, he is excited about his class and the school: “[...] I think it is so cool to be in a place like this. And my class...they’re amazing...” Michael likes to write, and he says that he writes the most in the subject of Danish: “I’m pretty much perfectly fine with it [writing], I do not mind sitting and writing at all. I actually like to write the assignments [in Danish] on my computer...” (Michael, 1st year).

Michael gets mostly mediocre marks for his assignments in Danish in his first year of secondary education. He reflects on his writing, and considers his disappointment, caused in large part by not being able to live up to the genre expectations for the essay and the literary analysis. In his second year, he realises that the genres are continuously a challenge: “I know very well that I ... I will not get an A for my next [assignment] ... because now I know what I have done wrong”.

In his second year, he experiences a kind of collapse; his former pleasure from writing disappears. He is frustrated by not being acknowledged for his endeavours with the genres, and points out that he now prefers writing in the subject of English. In the interviews, talking about the genres in especially the L1 subject, Michael underlines the lack of narrative genres and of writing tasks without fixed genre demands: ‘Really, I have to respond to the formalities in the texts [genres]. I don’t have complete freedom [...] I would really rather write things in my own way, with my own ideas and

composition. I have tried to put that wish aside, and have just kept on with how I am supposed to write [in the genres]”. (Michael 2nd year)

Michael’s reflections on language and genre writing often seem to refer to more profound identity processes, with a focus on senses and significant sensations about language: “[When I write] ... then I’ll just take that extra time to get it....to find a phrase, where, when you read it, you then lick your lips and say ‘delicious’”. (Michael 2nd year)

Michael speaks about a particularly bad experience with an assignment in his second year. Michael got a mediocre mark again, with a reply that he didn’t match the language required in the genre and for that “I am punished”, as he states it. The critical response becomes a vast personal conflict for Michael, as it increases his lack of identification with the subject. Even though, the conflict initiates a transition regarding Michael’s identification with the subject.

In his third year, Michael adapts to the genre expectations and uses more suitable and restrained language. He accepts that the genres have a relatively fixed form that he must comply with:

[...] at first when I tried to adapt to those genre requirements [...] I adopted a kind of negative attitude because they restricted my opportunities to write [...] maybe you don’t have that many options, but you do have opportunities in relation to the minor demands, so you can do different things, and that is good enough [...]. (Michael 3rd year)

Michael appears to be a reflective student, who has high expectations regarding school and writing, though the genres seem to be pitfalls for Michael. Finally, in his third year of secondary education, he adjusts to the genres.

### Michael – resistance, creativity and adaptation

The first assignment he hands in is an analysis of Raymond Carver’s “Popular Mechanics” as a preliminary exercise for the genre “literary analysis”. Michael’s voice is distinctively present throughout the whole assignment and he positions himself as a linguistically creative and spontaneous writer. The short story is about a divorce and who has the right to the child, which is a topic Michael relates to personally. This excerpt is from the end of his assignment:

[...] Everybody goes through break-ups one way or another. Even my parents are about to get divorced, which is why I can see a lot of what is going on in the text in my everyday life. Of course, nobody is physically tearing me apart, but I am tangled up in my parents’ fight over me, which is very common in divorces (fortunately).

Why the hell is it called Popular Mechanics? That was the first question I asked myself, after reading the text. [...]. (“Analysis of a short story”, Michael, 1st year)

In colloquial language, Michael addresses the reader directly. Michael positions himself in ways that combine “Michael-as-student” and “Michael-as-adolescent” in an academic-analytical and personal-reflective voice. The rhetorical question “Why the hell is it called...” is articulating these different positions. Michael’s (inappropriate) swearing and private experiences are part of the out-of-school knowledge that doesn’t meet the academic expectations of the genre. The genre for the assignment is a forerunner to the literary article, where the analysis of literature is essential. It might very well be that

Michael includes his own private experiences and a youthful, juvenile language because he is still unaware of the adequate disciplinary discourse.

The small story about being “tangled up” in the parents’ conflict is an interactional activity as part of a disciplinary engagement and can be a signal of Michael testing the boundaries for identifications and experiences with academic writing in the subject.

Another aspect of Michael’s use of the small story about his parent’s divorce is that narration seems to be an approach to the Carver text – there is a dialogue in the shared divorce-subject. Michael manages to extend the academic perspective through his reflection on his own situation. The way the private experience thus expands Michael’s analysis of the theme can be understood as an attempt to find a (new) disciplinary identity that can be linked to other identities outside the school context. In this assignment, we can see an academic novice writer who tries to approach the academic world by combining private with academic content and by challenging the genre’s characteristics and demands. One could say that this is a token of insisting on the dialogic nature of the genre.

In his second year, Michael writes an essay on “Media and Violence”. In this essay, we find a significant personal voice and sophisticated communicative skills – and there are small narratives as fragments regarding earlier life experiences. He writes in an academically reflective way, circling around the topic and responding to the texts included in the assignment. The following excerpts are from the introduction and from the middle of his essay:

Now I want to tell you a story which is about a tragic event and how the media fed off all the nourishment from it. Here I am writing about 11.09.2001. I can still remember, how my parents sat glued to the tube that day, with the nicely dressed lady from CNN...[...]

[...] On the one hand, we were told that the Arcade Game Pong would transform the youth into violent psychopaths, and fortunately that didn’t happen, but the Columbine killers used a large part of their time playing the extremely violent shooter game Doom. If there is a connection, I don’t know, but I want to ask you this: Is it the illustrative exposure of acts of violence – with all its consequences – or is it James Bond, who gracefully slides over the screen with his Walther PPK and brings down henchmen one by one without any bloodshed at all, that is harmful and really distorts the youths view on violence? (Essay on ‘Media and Violence’, Michael, 2nd year)

In this essay, we can see Michael’s engagement in the topic. Michael is an ardent gamer and his experiences with gaming contribute widely to his academic knowledge on the topic. Michael has adapted the disciplinary language of the subject’s discourse, and he finally gets credit for his efforts. In the feedback, the teacher notes that Michael’s language is “sensuous and specific”, and he is praised for having an adequate and genre-specific language in general. In the essay, advanced interpersonal resources in the “small stories” are set in action, communicating intensively with a reader: rhetorical questions, addressing the reader directly (“I want to tell you...”), changing point of view (from Michael to the parents), for instance. The interpersonal resources and the incorporation of small stories reflect narrative as mode, where the complex and often contradictory notions of media and violence are structured in a holistic narrative.

At the end of his second year, Michael hands in a reflection paper about his writing – bringing his writing development since the beginning of secondary education into focus. He writes:

“When I am given the option to choose which genre I want to write in, I obviously most often choose the essay. I have a tremendous wish to write freely about a topic I am interested in (actually, that is the reason for many of the continuous problems in my assignments), and I have the best opportunity for that in an essay. The conception of freedom within the scope of an essay and the fluid writing pleases me a lot, but ironically, it is a trap I often walk into. (Reflection on writing practices, Michael, 2nd Year)”

When Michael mentions the “reason for many of the continuous problems”, he refers to his creative and narrative resources. Michael does not think that the genres leaves room for narratives or creative writing even though these resources are strongly meaningful to his writer development. The justification of the essay being Michael’s preferred genre is the “conception of freedom within the scope of an essay and the fluid writing”. The essay genre seems to leave a narrow space for the narrative and interpersonal resources that Michael needs to identify with an assignment. Even though he faces challenges and is getting “trapped” in the genres, he has not lost his engagement and rediscovers his delight in writing. In general, his teacher does not acknowledge his creativity or narratives, even if the teacher recognises his “sensuous and specific” language in one specific essay. Assessing assignments as solitary pictures of academic skills will, in Michael’s case, misrepresent his growth and confuse the understanding of development as unidimensional.

In his late second year, he also hands in an essay on “The joy of Reading”. Now he is praised by the teacher for his essay, especially for his language. In the essay, there are numerous narratives, and they are not linked to private or personal experiences, but grounded in the subject, and the topic:

The reading of any kind of literature – no matter if it is a novel, poem, songs or anything else – does have one thing in common. You have to take your time to taste all the sentences, read some of them again, put the book away to think about your reading, then pick the book up again so that you can continue your reading – you have to sense the time the author used to construct a universe in every sentence, and the way that sentence after sentence forms a micro cosmos; forgetting time and place, where ethereal ideas float around together with sensations, thoughts and memories. It is also from this origin, that Jonas senses the joy of reading. He is engulfed by the way, Woolf knit together a flow of thoughts and trivial conversations, page after page, [...]; he senses a connection and discovers a friend who has been dead for 70 years. (Michael, 2nd year)

The academic recounting of the joy of reading is sophisticated regarding language and content. Through the recount, Michael creates a saturated, sensory description of both a reader’s and an author’s relation to reading and writing. By this, he crafts a metaphoric universe, where not only the reader, Jonas, disappears, but also the reader of Michael’s assignment vanishes into that universe. Michael has an attentive understanding of reading processes and the reader’s identification with the story or the characters being read about. In the excerpt, we are following in Michael’s footsteps as an alter ego and we get a taste of Michael’s comprehension of reading. In this excerpt, Michael manages to link the specific, like reading a book, to the very abstract like finding yourself outside time and space when you are captivated by a book. He implements his interest in literature in the assignment and seems to successfully identify himself with the task. He thus articulates an academically varied understanding of the topic, and expands the academic insight with the narrative on “captivation”. Chains of events

(reading, captivation, reflection, friendship) and different mental states are structured coherently in relation to the genre, the language and the topic. Michael creates academic and thematic small stories that are relevant to the genre, qualifying the understanding of the topic. Narrative as mode, as a way to structure an argument and develop insight into the topic, is also prominent in the excerpt.

Narrative competence is a successful resource for his writing, even though the teacher (and the curricula) does not encourage narratives as part of assignments. At the end of his third year, Michael writes an essay on “Computer Games and Bildung”:

No matter whether it is called ‘computer game’, ‘console game’, ‘mobile phone game’ or something completely different, you have to ask the question: What on earth is it? Computer games are what we will call all electronic games from now on, and they are difficult to categorise, precisely because they don’t belong to well-known categories. Because they contain a lot of features from the categories of movies, music, literature etc., you can’t deploy it in one category, nor under the category of ‘entertainment’, because computer games hold so many educational possibilities (not that one precludes the other, but let’s stick to the point). That is probably why so many people just categorise computer games as ‘art’, because according to a lot of people, art is an abstract and indescribable concept – like computer games. (Michael, 3rd year)

In the excerpt, Michael’s interpersonal resources are still recognisable, but his voice is less private, and identifies with reflection on and knowledge about the topic. This is a stable trait for the submissions at the end of his third year of secondary education; he adapts to the genres given, after rejecting and struggling with the restrictions.

### Michael’s writing – a conclusion

One can emphasise that Michael has evolved into a more academically creditable writer without losing his characteristic narrative writing resources. Michael’s language is refined and adapted to a discourse acknowledged in the discipline and the subject. And it seems that Michael’s narratives are transformed into academically more appropriate expressions, particularly during his 3rd year. The transformation seems to evolve from the personally involved to a more academic approach in which institutional discourse is strong.

But that doesn’t mean that his narrative skills and personal involvement have just been vehicles for this adaptation and development. Quite the contrary. His narrative resources seem to have been conducive to this development. Narratives are significant meaning-making devices and contribute to knowledge construction. For Michael, narratives have been building bridges between different contexts and between different modes as ways of thinking. The narrative aspect has been Michael’s path into the genres in the subject; for him, narratives and creativity are persistent opponents of genre restrictions. His developmental path is defined by resistance, creativity and in the end adaptation. Michael draws on his autobiography as a source for knowledge and coherence and it seems that autobiography can enhance self-reflection and disciplinary meaning-making – and thus support development. Michael outlines this in an interview about writing in the genres: “you can do different things, and that is good enough”. This is not a happy outcome, but at least a willing approval of the demands of the subject.

## Perspectives on writing in the subject of Danish

It is impossible to generalise or fully understand writer development by exploring one student's trajectory of writing. But the examination of Michael's writer development does reveal important aspects of the relation between writing, identity and development, and these aspects can shed light on the complex nature of a developing academic writer in a specific subject. In this longitudinal study, there was a focus on one participant, but a larger context: The genres in the L1 subject and a curriculum that gives prominence to a paradigmatic writing mode (Bruner, 1986a, 1986b, 2004). Michael's case highlights how genres can contribute to but also obstruct ways of being an academic writer. In the research project *Writing to Learn, Learning to Write. Literacy and Disciplinary in Upper Secondary Education* almost all students perform narrative genre transgressions in their assignments, as also seen in previous research (Piekut, 2012, 2015). Granted, Michael is special regarding his equilibristic narrative and creative resources, but he is not a special case in relation to genre transgression amongst student writers.

As we can see, Michael weaves together different discourses from in and out of school and use narratives as key strategies to participate in writing as a disciplinary activity. As several studies have noted (Curtis & Herrington, 2003; Roozen, 2010; Sommers & Saltz, 2004), scaffolding participation in the subject and the disciplinary writing goes through the application of everyday discourses, and one might say, through narratives as fundamental social, cognitive and disciplinary qualifying tools. The analysis of Michael's texts illustrates that writer development and identifications with the genres given isn't a linear, progressive development. It seems to be multi-dimensional and at times follows unpredictable patterns. In Michael's case, his development is sometimes "one step forward, two steps back", if we measure development solely as his level of mastery of genre competencies.

As can be expected, Michael writes in a more self-focused way in the first 2 years and in a more topic and subject-focused way in his third year.

Michael's writer development is a dramatic and at times even painful story, initiated by resistance to the entrenched genres. Michael experiences adversity when he writes in an engaged and creative way in the genres; he collides with the demands and expectations of the genres in his first 2 years of secondary education. The presence of narratives in Michael's assignments seems to insist on the dialogic characteristics of genres (Bakhtin, 1986) pointing to his interactional and communicative resources – and for the time being, cancelling out the ambivalent "double expectation" of the school genres.

In his last year, he navigates more consistently between genre demands and his need to write with a personal interest. In the end, the genres seem to be – at least – qualifying "traps"; Michael adapts to the requirements and adjusts his narratives to an academically adequate context.

Michael's writer development is thus characterised by a transitional experience between his second and third year. His struggle for academic acknowledgment and his need to express himself creatively and in narratives is a story of resistance. And after some personal failures, he initially develops an understanding of opportunities and restrictions in the genres that harmonises his identification with the genres. He had to come to terms with the subjects' conditions.



Michael's assignments and his reflections on academic writing confirm the formative aspects of both past and present autobiographical and disciplinary conditions, and the power of narratives in configuring coherence and change. Michael's developments indicate that narrative as text and as mode is a resource that can contribute to academic improvement. The small story perspective provides the analysis with a window into Michael's identity processes in the making (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008), and how these processes influence his writer development.

Disciplinary writing cannot be measured by whether the students adopt specific genre practices or not, but rather by how creative and involved they are in negotiating the genres given in the subject. An upper secondary curriculum with a more attentive approach to narratives and creative writing, in which it is realised that narratives are an important part of the cognitive development of adolescents, can foster holistic conditions for writers and writing development and build on the knowledge given in lower secondary school on both narrative and argumentative writing. The acquisition of academic skills requires literary skills (Becker-Mrotzek, Schramm, Thürmann, & Vollmer, 2013). This includes skills in reading and producing narratives. Therefore, we must be careful not to create curriculums based predominantly on non-fiction or disciplinary analytical competencies. Narrative as mode and as text has the potential to qualify writer and writing development that can enrich the subject and all those who reside in it.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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